Business Process Expert Part 1 – What Is the Problem Today?

Summary

This is the first part of a series of articles about the business process expert. This first article will discuss the problems, challenges, stereotypes, and clichés encountered between technology and business professionals. Having understood this, the articles to follow will carve out the role of the Business Process Expert Community, the skills needed, and how you can get on a career path to becoming a business process expert.

Author: Mario Herger

Company: SAP Labs

Created on: October 24, 2006

Author Bio

Mario Herger started with SAP as a developer in 1998. He worked for three years on the business information warehouse content team. From 2002 to 2004, he was a developer and product manager focused on the SAP xApps family of composite applications and SAP Composite Application Framework (SAPCAF) tool. From 2005 until 2006 he was a development manager for the analytics team in Palo Alto, California. Since October 2006, Herger has been part of the Business Process Expert Community team at SAP.

In addition, he operates the world's largest folk-dance Web site (www.dancilla.com) and a couple of other cultural Web sites that are based on a framework built by himself. He also is the author of books about SAP Composite Application Framework and the SAP NetWeaver Visual Composer tool.

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Introduction

Every year in the United States, more than US$60 billion are lost due to unsuccessful IT projects. According to studies from the Standish Group International, Inc. [1], 66% of all IT projects in the United States either fail completely, are late, and/or over budget. Only 34% of IT projects succeed – and this only means that from an IT point of view the software was finished, tested, and handed over to the business users.

There are many reasons for failed software projects, but one of the most important reasons seems to be the communication gap between IT and business. Technology professionals (or geeks [2]) on the one side and business professionals (or suits [2]) on the other side have a different vocabulary, attitudes, viewpoints, goals, and ways on how they dress. What they do have in common is that they do not communicate well with the other group, and they do not respect and trust each other.

This article series tries to work out the differences between those groups, explains the common misunderstandings, and demonstrates how business process experts fit in and can help make IT projects more successful in your company.

Roles

The strengths that any successful organization needs can be reduced to two factors:

1. Resolving problems
2. Influencing people

When there is a problem, such as designing a more fuel-efficient car, developing a real-time online investment service, or having a goal to send the first man or woman to Mars, we need people with the skills to resolve problems.

When it comes to convincing people to change driving attitudes, telling them the advantages of real-time investment, or explaining why we need to send a person to Mars, we need people who can influence others.

As can be easily seen from this example, both types of people need to work together. One is nothing without the other.

In many organizations, those two groups do not work together, do not communicate well, and in the worst case sabotage each other, while both have the best for their organization in mind.

To understand how it comes to this situation, we will take a closer look at technology and business professionals, what drives them, what they expect, and what their common misperceptions are.

Disclaimer: The following collection is, of course, subjective and does not make one of the groups look worse or better than the other. Both groups are equally important for the success of an organization and the next chapters serve as an introduction to the reasons why business process experts are needed, what their tasks are, and the skills they need to have.

Technology Professionals

Technology professionals – also referred to as geeks [2] or engineers – are people who administer, maintain, and build the IT infrastructure of an organization. To understand geeks, we need to learn how they think, how they see themselves, and what they fear or dislike. Through this analysis, we can learn what drives and motivates them.

How They See Themselves

The following list is an attempt to summarize the most common factors of how geeks view themselves:

1. Prefer substance over style (such as viewing no value in buzzword bingo)
2. Drive innovation (geeks = technology = evolution)
3. Play with technologies to stay at the top
4. Maintain high loyalty to other geeks
5. See themselves as artists (For example, see programming as a creative process.)
6. Perceive technology as fun

Let's dive into more details of what those factors mean.

Ad 1) The language and style used by technology professionals is, like with scientists or lawyers, often very precise and frank. Engineers in most cases try to communicate openly among themselves and with nontechnical people. They do not see a problem of discussing issues with technical and nontechnical people outside their organization (for example, a customer).

However, their open and frank style and the very technical (and for non-experts tiring and intimidating) language is often rejected and not understood by business professionals.

On the other hand, technology professionals dislike a lot of what they refer to as buzzword bingo from business people. The use of – in their opinion – hollow words, phrases, and motivational language makes technology professionals frown, as they do not see added value or substance in it. For them, it's a buzz that comes and goes.

Ad 2) To keep their expertise updated, technology professionals closely follow the newest technologies. They know that they have to train themselves, as their skills (such as programming languages and standards) quickly outdate or expand. To stay competitive in the job market, they must learn and experiment with new technologies.

This also means that technology experts often try to introduce and use the newest technologies. Therefore, they see themselves as the driving force behind changes and innovation. This point brings us straight to the next item.

Ad 3) Playing with technologies – or using them without having a specific task or project in mind – is an inherent part of being a geek. While business professionals use a new technology only if they are certain it will simplify their real tasks and improve their work, geeks must experiment and play without knowing whether they or their organization will profit from this time.

Only this way can engineers get a feeling of what a technology is capable of doing and for its limitations and make the proper technology decisions in future projects.

In addition, the last decade showed that companies viewed IT as an outsourceable commodity with devastating effects to the morale, loyalty, and perceived job security of their technology professionals. That made it even more important for geeks to stay up to date with the latest technologies and to stay competitive in the job market.

Ad 4) Technology professionals demonstrate a high camaraderie and loyalty to other geeks inside and outside their organization. They highly value the knowledge and expertise of people in their areas. To show their loyalty, they are ready to do more than what the average professional would be willing to do. Peer recognition is probably the most important aspect of all this, not so much the financial remuneration. The whole concept of open source and its obvious success are based on those facts.

That's why a dismissal or (perceived) repudiation of one member of this "club" can cause negative effects in the relation with all members involved.

Ad 5) Programming is not just about writing code, it's a creative process with many ups and downs. This is reminiscent of a painter often working over and over again on the same place, a writer rewriting whole chapters and nagging on a single word, or an engineer trying to solve a problem, taking many steps backwards to make one forward. Though there might be many solutions for one problem, some solutions are perceived as more beautiful or elegant than others.

Programmers regularly aspire to do the elegant (some say most bloated [4]) solution – remember that they are artists – while budget and time constraints force them to go with what they see as a potential source for a future troublemaker. Which brings us to the question of who sets the budget and time and what can be done about that?

The quintessence of this point is: the less a technology professional is enabled to go for the elegant solution, the lower the employee satisfaction.

Ad 6) Last but not least, many technology professionals – and now the word geek would much better describe that – regard playing with technology as fun. They love using technologies, and playing around with technology, and they enjoy the little successes in between. Many extremely successful organizations such as Google or IDEO even encourage such behavior.

How They Are Seen by Non-Geeks

Now that we have explored how technology professionals see themselves, we will take a look at them from the outside. How do others see them? Here is a list of the most common opinions about them. Technology professionals:

1. Don't want to understand anything about the business in which they work
2. Love technology for its own sake
3. Demand suits to understand technology
4. Need to meet the deadlines and stay within budget
5. Think that the rules do not apply to them
6. Are bad with people
7. Wear shorts, t-shirts, and ugly Birkenstocks
8. Lose interest as soon as the development phase is finished
9. Reject changes that come from the business

These all are interesting points, as they either clash with or confirm the self-reflection of the technology professionals.

Ad 1) Business professionals, especially, regularly think that geeks don't want to understand the business in which their organization is operating. They are just interested in their technologies and their own world. Financial numbers, strategy, and the market are what they see as being none of their business. In other words, technology professionals don't care about the company.

The fact is that they do care about their company, but in different ways. Their goal is to build the best solutions, have the servers running without any interruption, and make their living organism of servers and applications operate smoothly and with the highest reliability. The reason why they apparently don't care about numbers or strategy is that the business lingo is as much a foreign language as the technology lingo is for business professionals. Another reason is the perceived exchangeability of geeks. Geeks are loyal, as we've learned, but loyal to people, not to the company, especially as the recent (and in many cases disastrously failed) outsourcing hype made their jobs insecure.

Ad 2) Geeks don't worry about the business and its related needs; they just want to use technology for its own sake. Once they've played around with some technology, they want to force it on the business users – even if this new technology doesn't make their daily work more efficient.

The fact is that technology professionals like and need to explore new technologies (for example, we mentioned the outsourcing trend of the last years). New technologies do not necessarily mean a more effective tool for the business people, but reduced expenses in maintaining the infrastructure or developing new software. Although this is understandable for a business person, it clashes with geeks' ethics – as long as a tool doesn't help them to make their work more effective, they don't want to spend time on it. We will learn about this when we talk about the business professional.

Ad 3) Geeks seem to be permanently upset and show arrogant behavior when business people do not understand technology. Geeks ignore advice from business people and do what they want.

The fact is that this is true. Geeks don't like it when business people give them advice or make decisions on technology without them. That's like the management of an airplane maker deciding that the engineers should put wooden wagon wheels on the futuristic plane because the company brokered a good deal with the local wood furniture store while remodeling their offices.

Everybody can predict that this is not going to work. Why assume that business professionals can make a decision on IT technology? Both sides must try to understand the implications and come to a joint decision that keeps both sides allied for the common goal.

Ad 4) The way business works is drawn around time lines and money. It's clear that an organization can only survive if it wisely manages its resources and ensures that those resources are added to the organization. In other words, make sure that the company earns more money than it spends.

Budgets and schedules are the very means for control. This method of control clashes with multiple factors listed in the previous chapter. Engineers need to spend seemingly non-productive time with new technologies and do work that is perceived by them as a creative and therefore unpredictable process.

Ad 5) The perception of technology professionals is that they do not follow rules. Whatever dress code, working hours, wording, or communication channel are defined in the code of business conduct or other sets of rules, geeks break or circumvent them. They come late and stay long into the night, prefer to dress in nonpresentable clothing, mess up and decorate their working spaces with the weirdest gimmicks, toys, and trash, and communicate with other communities and customers in tech-lingo and so on.

Fact is, and we mentioned that in the earlier chapter, that many of those rules – most often made by business professionals – clash with the self-conception of geeks.

Ad 6) Business people think that geeks cannot communicate. Whenever they talk to them, the answers they get seem weird and not understandable. Geeks' body language indicates that they are annoyed with the business people and their questions.

The fact is that as much as technology professionals seem to be unable to communicate with business professionals, business professionals are unable to communicate with technology professionals. Geeks in fact communicate very well with each other; it's just a different language: tech lingo versus buzzword bingo.

Ad 7) They dress in t-shirts, shorts or jeans, and do not pay attention to shaving, haircuts, and other elements of civilized people.

As mentioned before, geeks value substance over style. Appearance is of no value. For them it doesn't matter whether somebody is dressed well or not – what matters is whether somebody is knowledgeable.

Ad 8) Once the project is finished, the handover to the business people seems to be an annoyance factor for technology professionals. Training the business people and showing patience with questions seem to be something that geeks do not like. They apparently lose interest.

The fact is that this is true. For many geeks, interest ends when the challenge is over, the project is finished, and the problems are solved. They move on to the next technical challenge, and this in exactly the moment when business people get interested in the new tool.

Ad 9) Business people often complain that their suggestions or requirements are blocked by IT. Whatever they suggest, there are a thousand reasons why IT thinks this cannot be done or is not a good idea.

The fact is that this is true. One reason for this is that technology professionals do not welcome suggestions when the business professional does not fulfill a minimum understanding of technology. That does not mean that a business professional has to be fluent in tech lingo, but show basic knowledge of and interest in the language and technology. Another reason is that seemingly small requirements can effect huge changes in the IT infrastructure. If the perceived additional business value is smaller than the required effort for adapting the solution, then the technology professional will try to block it.

How to Alienate Them

What's the best way for a business professional to alienate a technology professional? Make sure to do the following:

- Tell business professionals how they should do their work.
- Make technology decisions without asking them.
- Let them know that you can outsource their jobs easily.
- Make them follow the code of business conduct closely.

Some of these points are reminiscent of a scene from the movie *Amadeus*, where the emperor comments on one of Mozart's compositions: "Your work is ingenious. It is quality work. But there are simply too many notes. Just cut a few, and it will be perfect." And Mozart responds: "Which few did you have in mind, Majesty?"

How to Win Them

Here are some of the best ways to win over technology professionals:

- Show honest interest in their work.
- Learn the basics of the technology – your business runs on it.

Show interest in their work and the technology. Even if you do not understand and do not need to understand every little detail, showing interest is a sign of respecting technology professionals.

And don't forget that this is the technology on which your business runs. That should make it your professional duty to understand the fundamentals.

Business Professionals

Business professionals – also known as suits [2] or business people – are people who do the business, which means interact with customers and employees, sell services and products, organize the projects and time lines, manage employees, and administrate the organization. Depending on their exact roles, suits either keep the money coming in the organization and/or create an environment where the employees actually manufacturing the services and goods can fulfill their job.

How They See Themselves

This list of characteristics is the basis for what skills and talents they see as important for their job:

1. Communicate well with people.
2. Work professionally.
3. Give a trusting impression.
4. Use tools only if they help them with their work.
5. Drive innovation.

Ad 1) One of the most important tasks in this profession is communication and interaction with people. Building up relationships with customers, partners, and employees is necessary to achieve business success. If the service or product the company is offering is very similar to competitors' products or services, then the personal relationship is especially critical, as this might be the only differentiator of importance.

That's why impression is very important. The customer has to see and feel that this company is trustworthy. Therefore, the emphasis on style, colors, branding, appropriate dress, and usage of words and phrases that are motivational and trust inducing is important.

That's why words are often used to make bad things look good – as the feelings and insecurities of people are involved. Even if there were blunt failures, the right wording can motivate again, and encourage forward movement, and enable the willingness to learn from them.

Ad 2) Closely related with the former item is the aim to work professionally. Be on time, be fast, and be reliable. Make the impossible possible. Be professional, courteous, helpful under all circumstances, positive, and follow the rules but allow for flexibility.

Ad 3) Trust is a flexible term. In the business world, trust means that the contracted partners can rely on the fulfillment of contracts and reasonable support. (So much for the theory.)

If you conclude from the outer appearance of somebody the "appearance" and quality of the product or service, you will probably choose the one who gives you the most trustworthy picture.

A geek might prefer a geek because they understand each other. But compare it with choosing a babysitter. If you have the choice between two babysitters that you don't know, would you choose the one who comes in with clean clothes, washed hair, and a decent look or the one with dirty pants, a torn t-shirt, and bad breath? Customers see their company as their baby; and if the only differentiator they can see is the outer appearance, they will choose on that criterion.

That's why this item is very important, and that's why they mostly wear suits or are more dressed up.

Ad 4) As suits try to work as professionally as they can, they don't want to spend time playing with tools. A tool that does not make their work more efficient is not worth with the time. There are more important things to do. While technology professionals aim for the elegance of their solution, elegance for a business professional means that a customer is being served well or that an employee is well managed. Any tool that does not support either of these goals is of no interest and no value to suits.

Ad 5) Some business professionals actually see themselves as the innovative driving force in the organization. New business models change the competitive balance of the market and help gain an advantage over competitors. Business models are invented by suits, and new business models need new and advanced technologies.

The biggest challenge that business professionals see often comes from inside the organization, as technology professionals – in the suits' opinions – often resist their technical requirements to make the new business models effective.

How They Are Seen by Non-Suits

To non-suits, business professionals:

- Refuse to learn anything about technology
- Don't understand technology, but nevertheless insist on making technology pronouncements
- Don't value technology
- Care only about money
- Resist innovations (suits = policy = status quo)
- Value image over substance
- Wear suits

Ad 1) The probably most overheard reproach of business professionals is that they don't know anything about the technology their technological counterparts are providing them and that they show no interest in learning more about these tools. As soon as a geek tries to explain a technology, you can see on the face of suits how they go into an idle mode, hoping that it's soon over.

The fact is that business professionals want to learn about technology, but only if they see that they can use it for doing their tasks more efficiently. If they get the impression that they are receiving a basic lecture on things that they do not really need to know and that do not help them work more efficiently, they will not pay attention.

Ad 2) Here is a comparison to sports: When the German soccer team plays, 80 million team trainers are out there watching on TV and know more than the actual team trainer.

In many cases, business professionals try to influence technology decisions, or even make technology decisions, based on nontechnical reasons. A partnership with a company that offers an apparently similar product and wishes to leverage that partnership – or the latest hype reported from a questionable magazine – without checking and respecting the opinion of its very own technological professionals will lead to failed investments as well as lost respect, trust, and loyalty of its very own specialists that the organizations pays.

Ad 3) Business professionals (in most cases) do not care about the technology itself, but they care about how efficiently they can do their job with it. In other words, suits value efficient technology.

Ad 4) Technology professionals accuse business professionals of valuing money more then everything else. In fact, money is an indicator for suits to determine how efficiently they are able to build up and maintain relationships. For them, money is a key indicator.

Another fact is that technology professionals should also care about money, which keeps the organization going and secures their jobs (and rent payments).

Ad 5) Both technology and business professionals see themselves as innovative. At the same time, each accuses the other of preventing it. What we have here is a classic Catch-22 situation. While technology professionals drive innovation by introducing new technological models without necessarily requiring a business case, business professionals drive innovation with new business models without caring about the technology. Both are innovative, but looking at different sides of the coin.

Ad 6) As stated earlier, trustworthiness and impression are important to maintain customer relationships.

Ad 7) Wearing suits is a way to reflect trustworthiness through visual means.

How to Alienate Them

If you do not want to have a working relationship with them, then consider suits as stupid and illogical. The only smart guys are geeks, but don't ask them about the money that covers your paycheck.

How to Win Them

Here are some of the best ways to win over business professionals:

- Show honest interest in their work.
- Learn the basics of the business – your technology helps to run it.

Next Article

In the next article, we will discuss what the Business Process Expert Community can do to serve as a "marriage counselor" (use of this term in this context attributed to Denis Browne) between those groups and help make IT projects successful.

Related Content

[1] Standish Group International, Inc.: "CHAOS: Chronicle 2003."
[2] Pfleging, Bill and Zetlin, Minda: *The Geek Gap – Why Business and Technology Professionals Don't Understand Each Other and Why They Need Each Other to Survive*. Prometheus Books. 2006.
[3] Saffer, Dan: "Everything You Wanted to Know About Designers." September 8, 2006.
[4] Brooks, Frederick P.: *The Mythical Man-Month*. Addison Wesley. 1995.

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